

Northern Exposure:  
Summer at Umbagog National Wildlife  
Refuge

By: Tylar Greene

## Northern Exposure

Culture shock is real. Imagine waking up in New York City one morning and the same night, falling asleep in Northern New Hampshire. How bad can that be right? Well, if moose, black bears, common loons, and dense forests were all characteristics of the Bronx, New York, I would've been fine. Unfortunately for me, that wasn't the case.

After driving through what was probably the most scenic highway, I pulled into the parking lot of Umbagog National Wildlife Refuge, the small headquarters tucked in between a river and an abundant forest. I probably didn't show it the first few days, but even with the hospitable refuge staff, I was filled with an overwhelming amount of fear. Yeah, I researched Umbagog before I arrived and my supervisor warned me it was remote but I was in shock. It was unreal that places like this one still existed. There were 3 small stores in town, a large outdoor sportsmen store, the post office, the town hall, the elementary school, a diner, and the Errol Motel. The town sits on top of a river which is about an hour away from any other civilization in all directions. I panicked and I didn't know how I was going to make it with friends and family so far away, I felt extremely unfamiliar with the surroundings and I had a healthy fear of the woods and the wildlife that inhabit it. And just my first few days in the house, we had a few lovely visitors – bats! I was for sure losing my mind.

With my blackberry reading SOS and even without a Starbucks in sight, I pulled it together and began to push through my fears. I went to work excited for my first day and decided I would take it one day at a time. The area is unusually picturesque with stunning sunrises and sunsets on the lakes and rivers, an unreal night-time sky, and some pretty photogenic wildlife. I was a sucker for the photography options. Aside from dodging a few stubborn night-time moose, I was really enjoying my time at the refuge. I had never seen about half of the wildlife I saw in the first week, which included common loons and their chicks, bald eagles, osprey, king fisher, grouse, various other bird species, insane amounts of moose, a black bear, a fox, and much, much more.

With the help of diving into my workload and support from the refuge staff, I was facing fears head on in Week 1. The first weekend at the refuge, I was assisting a group of refuge volunteers with rusty blackbird surveys. Lucky for me, they nest in remote wetlands which means the only way to spot this blackbird is to hike in – through dense, wet, swampy forests. This was one of my fears – something about a dark, muddy forests and thousand pound mammals makes me nervous. Trust me, it was fun! Aside from getting sucked into a wetland, surveying the rusty blackbirds with telemetry proved to be quite addicting and pretty cool. I learned a great deal from this one weekend of surveying rusty blackbirds and completed the first refuge newsletter based on the weekend survey.

Another one of my projects included to set up and give environmental education presentations to Umbagog's Youth Conservation Corps (YCC). YCC has to do large amounts of field work in off-trail areas on the refuge so the first

presentation was an orienteering course. I had to put together a field course for them in the woods to test what they learned from my presentation, which meant heading into the woods alone to get the course set up. Unlike the first week, I wasn't with a group hiking in this time. After about 10 minutes, a few deep breaths and some self-motivation, I headed into the woods. Panicked, my heart was beating about 10 times per second. A few times, I worried I was being followed by an animal and then I realized that was my loud, pounding heartbeat. A few looks over the shoulders, a couple swarming deer flies, and 2 hours later, the course was done. For YCC, the course was a stepping stone to hone their orienteering skills but setting up the course is what helped me to adjust to Umbagog. It's not easy to face fears when you're terrified and probably misinformed. I was proud of myself that I was able to push through something I never would have thought possible just a week before.

In addition to giving YCC an orienteering course, I gave them a course in tree identification of the North Woods, a presentation on bats & white-nose syndrome and a presentation about Umbagog's treasured bird, the common loon. I also did the Tree Identification and the Bats & White-nose Syndrome presentations for the general public as part of Umbagog's Summer Presentation Series. In addition to working in the visitor center assisting visitors with their questions, I assisted with refuge loon surveys, rusty blackbird surveys, waterfowl brood surveys, honed my cartography skills by crafting some pretty impressive maps for visitor use, attended public festivals to represent the refuge, completed the summer newsletters, made digital image slideshows and displays, and made brochures to be used in the visitor center. I enjoyed interacting with the public because the more questions people asked, the more I was able to spread news about the refuge as well as learn about things I maybe wasn't aware of.

In addition to working at the refuge, on my days off, I explored the surrounding areas. I visited the highest peak in the northeast United States; Mount Washington and I hiked part of the Appalachian Trail.

When I first arrived at Umbagog, aside from being nervous about the forests and the animals, it was just scary to be somewhere so completely different. From the biggest city in America, to a small town in the woods in New Hampshire with a population of about 350 people. Not only did I struggle with missing my family, but it was difficult to find different things to do on the weekends and get adjusted to a different way of living. At the end of my internship, looking back on my experience, I am glad that I chose this refuge. I learned a lot about myself, learned a lot from the refuge staff, was able to push through fears and keep an open mind and I really had a great time. I got to do things I may never get the chance to do again and I appreciate the nature that lies beyond my precious concrete box. Although it was a difficult, personal struggle for me the first few days, I gave myself a chance and found that was the right thing to do. I didn't have cell phone service or internet but I saw these things that could get some people down as opportunity. I'm sure there aren't many other native city girls that could say they spent the summer in Errol! It would be a bold-faced lie for me to say that this was easy because it wasn't – at first. It's scary to be placed somewhere outside of your comfort zone, and not feel all of the emotions I felt. Once I began to take everything in and explore and experience

what was around me, the days became, fun and easy and I was looking forward to everything.

If I could give advice to future interns, I would tell them to take advantage of everything their refuge has to offer, explore, dive in and take risks, go where you've never been, and keep an open mind, because the feeling of fear is more of a mental struggle that one can overcome, rather than a legitimate physical limitation.

If I could go back and do it all again, I wouldn't change a thing, bats in the house and all.